

REORIENTATION OF THE POPULATION FROM ROMANIA TOWARDS THE RURAL AREA – CHANGES GENERATED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Since the Covid-19 pandemic imposed, to the entire planet Earth, a state of emergency and isolation, especially the population in urban areas has reoriented towards returning to their birthplaces or migrating to rural areas, attractive in terms of location and infrastructure. The purpose of the paper is to emphasize the difference in the attractiveness of the rural environment, for the years 2020-2023. In order to understand the population's motivation to relocate, translated into the benefits sought, the survey method was used, through a questionnaire distributed only online, to 87 people from big cities (Bucharest, Ploiesti, Alexandria, Targoviste, Brasov, Timisoara, Cluj-Napoca), who decided to move to the rural area in the pandemic and post-pandemic years. According to data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, the years after 2020 are marked by a clear reversal of the flow of internal migration between areas of residence, in favor of rural. The most conclusive figures are those of 2022 and 2023, when 31.6% and 34.9% of changes of residence take place from urban to rural areas. The entire study shows that the fear of a new life of isolation, as well as the opportunity to work from home, were the reasons that led most people to make this change.

Key words: migration, rural area, benefits, remote work, Covid-19, Romania

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus led to major changes in everything related to life in 2020-2023, as evidenced by many socio-economic research worldwide. This is why the migration phenomenon wasn't without major changes, especially as the crisis period lengthened and people were forced to find solutions to ensure a standard of living as close as possible to the one they were used to.

Most of the world's population was impacted by the fact that they couldn't leave their homes, and then by the idea of carrying out all their lucrative activities from home.

These changes, once put into practice, in many fields of activity became permanent and giving people the chance to be able to work from anywhere, no longer being tied to a specific place.

At the same time, it should be noted that the impact of these changes was different, depending on the level of development of each

country, but also of each place (Petersen et al., 2024) [23].

According to this paradigm, the migration phenomenon was much more intense during the Covid-19 pandemic in developed and developing countries, compared to poor countries. Taking this into account, the population of Europe was strongly impacted by the imposed changes (Incaltarau et al., 2024) [14].

In the early years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021), the idea was circulated that rural areas were much more vulnerable to this virus, mainly due to a not very well-developed healthcare system (Cuadros et al., 2021; Dudley et al., 2023; Pandey et al., 2022) [3, 5, 22], but also to the advanced age of the resident population (Monnat, 2021; Pickering et al., 2023; Rajib et al., 2020) [16, 25, 26]. Subsequently, it turned out that these speculations weren't founded, and the rural environment became increasingly attractive to the inhabitants of the cities, who either

returned to their parental homes or decided to buy a new home in the countryside.

The motivations are diverse, relating to the social and economic status of each person:

-the desire to be in the middle of nature (Golubchikov, 2021) [10];

-avoiding other situations of isolation at home (Gatti & Procentese, 2021) [8];

-remote activities – lucrative and educational, which no longer required living in big cities (Guzman Rincon et al., 2021) [12].

The study of the specialized literature highlighted the fact that this migratory trend towards rural areas has been recorded in many countries of the world (Gonzalez-Leonardo et al., 2022) [11], some conclusive examples being Italy (De Luca et al., 2020) [4]; Great Britain (Glass et al., 2024) [9]; United States of America (Low et al., 2022; Mueller et al., 2021), Turkey (Oncu et al., 2023) [15, 17, 21]; Brazil (Floss et al., 2020) [7]; Chile (Elejalde et al., 2024) [6]; India (Behera et al., 2021) [1], Nepal (Bista et al., 2022) [2], Nigeria (Ofuoku et al., 2021) [20], Indonesia (Syafitri et al., 2022) [29] and Australia (Ramachandran, 2021) [27].

In general, as other crises have proven over time, the rural economy is a particularly adaptable and resilient one (Philipson et al., 2020) [24]. Most likely, in the coming years, cities will have to adapt to the new expectations of residents and will be in direct competition with rural areas on the periphery (Sharifi & Lee, 2024) [28], with a lower population density, more green spaces, lighter traffic, a quieter, stress-free lifestyle (Halfacree, 2024) [13].

Based on existing data on the counter-urbanization phenomenon generated by the pandemic situation, the proposed objective of the research has been to determine to what extent the attractiveness of the rural environment has changed and what were the grounds that led several Romanians to make a change in their living habits.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Considering that the study of specialized literature is only a first step in the research process, the study was based on data provided

by the National Institute of Statistics of Romania, which recorded unexplained fluctuations in urban-rural migration in 2020-2023. Among those existing at the national level, two basic parameters were chosen, namely:

-residence establishments;

-structure of internal migration flows.

The chosen control was 2019, the year before the pandemic began. Excel was used to analyze the data. Since these figures only indicate people's preferences, but not the reasons behind the decision to change their residential environment, a questionnaire with 15 questions, all with open answers, was prepared and distributed online, via Google Forms.

The questions addressed to the target group are those in Table 1.

Table 1. Questions included in the questionnaire for people who moved to rural areas

No. crt.	Question addressed to the target group
1.	How many members does your family consist of?
2.	What is your age and that of other family members?
3.	Do you own your own car?
4.	During the Covid-19 pandemic, did you work from home?
5.	What is your family's net monthly income?
6.	What city did you live in before you decided to relocate to the countryside?
7.	How far from the city is the new home?
8.	Is your current home new or a parental home/family heirloom?
9.	Please specify the month and year of the move.
10.	What were the factors that led you to relocate to the rural area?
11.	Do you still have the opportunity to work remotely or do you commute to work daily?
12.	Are you happy with your decision to move to the countryside?
13.	Do you plan to stay in the countryside or move back to the city?
14.	Do you think your standard of living has changed for the better or worse as a result of the relocation?
15.	What are the factors that would make you return to the urban environment?

Source: original.

Completing the questionnaire takes about 5-10 minutes and it was ultimately accessed by 87 people who migrated from urban to rural areas during 2020-2023.

The interviews were distributed in a six months period (March – September 2024) and the process of identifying the respondents was the hardest, since there is no database with this

kind of information. In the end, the respondents were family, friends and their neighbours or acquaintances.

That's why the respondents are only from several Romanian cities: Bucharest, Ploiesti, Alexandria, Targoviste, Brasov, Timisoara and Cluj-Napoca, without covering the entire country. This is one of the limitations of the present study.

Giving these facts, no formula was used in order to calculate the nationally representative target group for such research.

The obtained answers weren't intended for statistical processing, but for social purposes, identifying the population habits and perceptions, in dynamic after the pandemic years.

Statistical data were processed in Excel, where conclusive graphs were also generated. The responses received to the online survey were entered into individual tables, one for each question, so that the most important factors could be determined in percentage terms.

Since there are 15 questions and each one needs to be individually analyzed, the graphical representation was excluded, due to lack of space,

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The first analyzed parameter is that relating to residence establishments, which underwent the most significant changes between 2019 and 2020 (Table 2).

In 2020, the total number of people who chose to change their residence increased by 37.85%, compared to the previous year.

In 2021 and 2022, against the backdrop of events related to the state of health crisis, which was prolonging, the flow of changes of residence was much reduced, so that by the end of 2023 it would return to a value almost identical to that of the year before the start of the pandemic.

At the same time, a constant decrease in the attractiveness of the urban area is observed in 2019-2021, followed by a period of growth in 2022 and 2023, but without reaching the pre-pandemic flow.

Table 2. Data on the population number that lived in each residence environment, during 2019-2023

each residence environment, during 2019-2023						
Residence indicator	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2023/2019 (%)
	number of people					
Total	202,372	278,961	178,864	191,635	202,418	+0.02
Urban	146,180	128,184	120,779	128,957	133,185	-8.89
Rural	56,192	150,777	58,085	62,678	69,233	+23.21
Rural / Urban (%)	38.44	117.62	48.09	48.60	51.98	+13.54
Rural / Total (%)	27.77	54.04	32.47	32.71	34.20	+6.43

Source: own processing after NIS data [18].

The very significant increase in residential establishments in rural areas in 2020 cannot go unnoticed. Compared to the previous year, there is an increase of 168.32%, so that in the next three years, normal values will return.

To better illustrate the differences that emerged between 2019 and 2023 in terms of people's preference to relocate and their choice of a particular residence environment, the graph in Figure 1 was drawn up.

The number of people for each of the variants (total, urban and rural) is shown in columns, while the line graph highlights the percentage represented by residence establishments in rural areas.

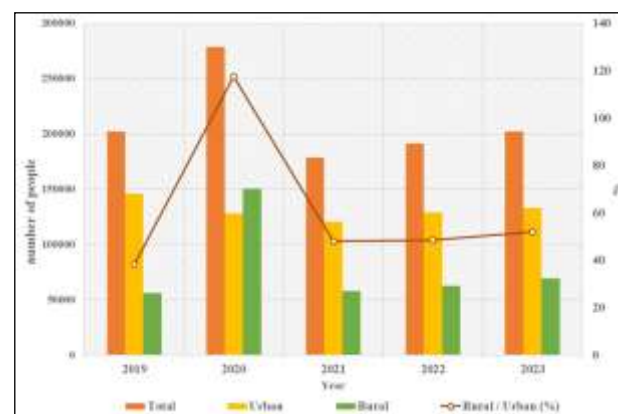


Fig. 1. Graph of population preferences regarding the choice of place of residence in the years 2019-2023
Source: original, after NIS [18] data.

The second parameter taken into study, namely the structure of internal migration flows, is exemplified in the same format, in order to be conclusive and by comparison with the residence establishments preferred by the Romanian population (Table 3).

Table 3. Data on the number of people ensuring the internal migration flow in 2019-2023, depending on the area of residence

Residence environment	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2023/2019 (%)
	number of people					
Total	403,221	367,569	374,526	457,872	430,133	+6.67
From urban to rural	113,785	116,491	111,888	144,674	150,299	+32.09
From rural to rural	77,508	73,580	71,089	89,267	83,450	+7.67
From rural to urban	94,306	77,825	84,169	98,414	87,598	-7.11
From urban to urban	117,622	99,673	107,380	125,517	108,786	-7.51

Source: own processing after NIS data [19].

The accelerated growth in the attractiveness of the rural environment, especially urban-to-rural migration, cannot go unnoticed. Data from 2022 and 2023, in particular, indicate that 31.6% and 34.9% of the registered changes of residence were from urban to rural, with the highest number of the four categories of migration environments.

If before the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV2 virus, migration to the urban environment (rural - urban and urban - urban) amounted to over 52% of the total, starting with 2020 it decreased to 48%, and in 2023 it reached 45%. The afore mentioned decreases automatically led to increases in migration to the rural environment, which reached 55% of the total.

The graphic representation in Figure 2 highlights the internal migration fluctuation.

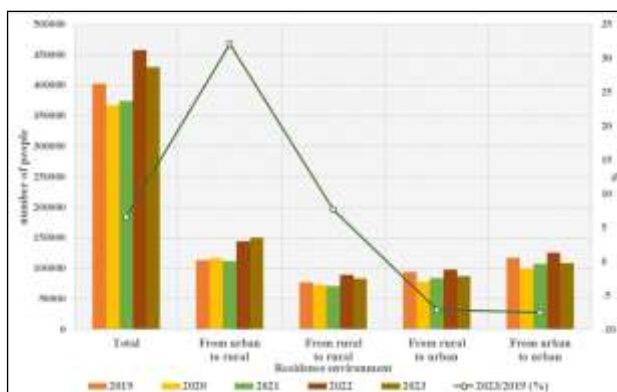


Fig. 2. Graph of the structure of migration flows in terms of the choice of residence environment in the years 2019-2023

Source: original, after NIS [19] data.

Regarding the total migration flow within Romania, it suffers a decrease in 2020 and 2021, which were the first years of pandemic. Nevertheless, in the following two years (2022 and 2023), the growth is accelerated, exceeding the value of the control year (2019). It should be noted that this migration increase, covering the people who moved from one residential environment to another, is best reflected in the relocations from urban to rural areas. The other categories remained relatively constant, compared to the evolution of the total number of people who relocated.

The last stage of the personal research consisted of compiling a questionnaire to find out the reasons that led city dwellers to move to the countryside in 2020-2023, amid the Covid-19 health crisis. After receiving the responses, they were evaluated and conclusions could be drawn.

Regarding **Question 1** – “How many members does your family consist of?”, it emerged that an overwhelming proportion (91.9%) of those who decided to move to the rural area are family-oriented, and 85.05% have at least one minor child.

This aspect is very important, as the existence of children and the desire to provide them with the opportunity to have their own yard to play in was cited as one of the motivations for relocating to the rural area.

Answers to **Question 2** emphasized that 88.5% of the respondents have between 19 and 45 years, while the highest number of family members are kids (Figure 3).

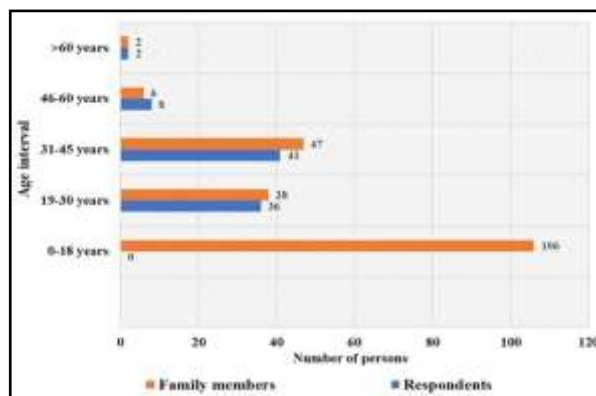


Fig. 3. Distribution graph of the age interval for the respondents and their family members

Source: original, own data.

Regarding **Question 3**, the answers highlighted

the fact that 94.3% of the 87 respondents have at least one car of their own at family level, an aspect that helps with easier mobility, in case of need.

Question 4 divided the respondents into two broad categories:

- 77% are those who were able to carry out their work remotely;
- 23% are those who lost their jobs during the pandemic, which is why they were forced to move.

Question 5. Regarding the family's net monthly income, the values were grouped into several ranges, with representatives in each category, which led to the conclusion that this indicator is not representative for making the decision to migrate to the rural area.

Question 6. Much more important is the fact that all respondents moved to the rural area after previously living in large urban centers like Bucharest, Ploiesti, Alexandria, Targoviste, Brasov, Timisoara, Cluj-Napoca (Figure 4).

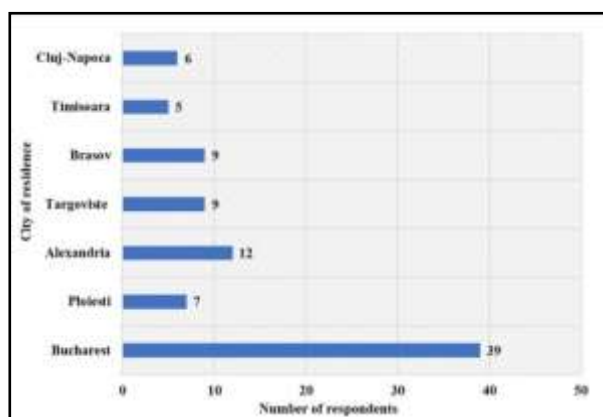


Fig. 4. Distribution graph of the city of residence for the respondents that chose to relocate

Source: original, own data.

Question 7 "How far from the city is the new home?" revealed that the new home was, in 83% of cases, 20-40 km from the former residence, in the immediate vicinity of the city. This percentage correlates with the fact that 77% of respondents kept their jobs and work remotely or in a hybrid system. In the event of a return to the old work schedule, they may commute to the city.

For Question 8, respondents had to choose between two answer options:

- new home – 66% of respondents;

- parental home – 34% of respondents.

Of the 66%, about half were those who moved to their hometowns, where they have parents or more distant relatives.

Particularly interesting was **Question 9**, regarding the date of moving to the rural area. It turned out that:

- 47% of the 87 interviewees relocated in the fall of 2020, about 6 months after the start of the pandemic;
- 33% moved during 2021;
- 20% moved during 2022.

The impact of the pandemic has diminished over time, which is why people's preference for migrating to rural areas has also decreased, but remains a much more accelerated phenomenon than before 2020. It can be said that the rural area has become more attractive from many points of view.

In response to Question 10, each respondent provided at least two factors that led them to decide on relocation. The most common answers, in order of importance, were:

- the fear of a new period of isolation at home and the impossibility of having a place to sit outside and play for children – mentioned by 71 people;
- the chance to break away from the city, now with the possibility of working from home (remotely) – mentioned by 55 people;
- lower living costs in rural areas – mentioned by 20 people.

Given that this questionnaire was sent out for completion in the second half of 2024, when everything had returned to normal, the role of **Question 11** was to determine whether this change had caused many others. It seems that only 21% of respondents still work from home, 37% benefit from a hybrid system (with 1-2 days a week physically, the rest remotely), and the remaining 42% have to commute to work.

However, the benefits of living in the countryside seem to outweigh the disadvantages, as all 87 respondents state that they are satisfied with the move (**Question 12**), intend to stay long-term (**Question 13**) and consider their standard of living to be much higher (**Question 14**).

To the last question (**Question 15**), respondents unanimously stated that they would not want to return to the urban environment. However, several of them completed their answer by

saying that only major changes, impossible to implement at the moment, could make them change their minds:

- pollution levels reduced by over 50%;
- light traffic, including during peak hours;
- significant increase in areas occupied by green spaces and parks;
- reduction in current expenses;
- decreased stress levels.

CONCLUSIONS

The changes generated by the Covid-19 pandemic are substantial at a socio-economic level, aspects that it seems that the population of the entire globe has become accustomed to and which have been integrated into the daily lives of each of us.

With the changes imposed (isolation, remote work, online ordering of goods, etc.), many people have adapted so well to what was offered to them as an alternative that they no longer wanted to return to the pre-pandemic state. Many of these are the ones who decided that the time was right to make a major change, and for this they chose the rural environment. According to the data presented, migration to rural areas reached unimaginable levels in the very year of the pandemic's onset – in 2020, by the end of the year, the number of those who established their residence in the countryside increased by over 160%, compared to previous years. This aspect correlated with that resulting from our own research, based on the questionnaire.

This trend is also supported by figures that prove that in the years 2020-2023, more and more people moved from urban to rural areas, this being the most significant migration course in Romania. The motivations behind such a change are diverse, but the results are favorable, providing satisfaction to new residents. It is very possible that the Covid-19 pandemic has given rise to a new migratory flow, and the rural area will regain its former glory, to the detriment of large urban centers.

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